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Canada

Women and Art
in
North Yemen

Women And Art In North Yemen

Milook Hadad Aqiqi

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
Art Education and Art Therapy

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts in
Art Education at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

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CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
Division of Graduate Studies

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By: Milook Hadad Aqiqi

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A B S T R A C T

WOMEN AND ART IN NORTH YEMEN

MILOOK HADAD AQIQI

This is a research of Yemenite art (basketry), combined with an investigation of the techniques along with methods for gathering and preparing the materials used in traditional basketmaking among the rural women of North Yemen. The way that women pass knowledge of this art to the next generation was explored as well as the way in which art education is orally conducted. In addition, it displays the medieval-like state of women and their struggle for better conditions. This study is based on field observations where pictorial as well as written documentation has been prepared.

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Last but not least, I thank my sons Hayder and Leroy for waiting as patiently as good boys can.

DEDICATION

To my mother and father
for all the encouragement
and support they have shown
while pursuing my studies

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PREFACE

In 1987, while taking courses of the last year of my undergraduate program- specialization in Art Education, there was a great emphasis on the role of women in the field of art, and being a believer in the principle of giving equal opportunities to both sexes, I became aware of the need to study issues about women and their contribution to Art. At that time an opportunity came up to go to North Yemen with my family, so I decided to apply for graduate studies in order to research the above mentioned subject in that developing country.

The issues of women, art and Yemen have been reflected in almost all my papers during my graduate courses. This was mainly due to the support and encouragement I had received from professors and instructors of those courses.

Weaving, pottery and basketry are always considered the traditional arts practiced by women in different cultures. I had been advised to concentrate on one of them, therefore I completed my theoretical research on weaving. This was in Montreal before starting field work in Yemen.

In Yemen, I found out that the number of weavers has been drastically reduced due to the abundance of imported machine-made products. And those who still weave are living in very remote areas, were impossible for me to reach or obtain pictorial documentation. Therefore, and after consultation with my supervisor, I changed my topic from weaving to Basketry.

In December 1989, I was able to complete a 19 month field research. I feel that doing such research in a developing country like Yemen opens a new dimension for it is, to my knowledge, the first time that a study in the field of Art Education has ever been conducted in this region.

INTRODUCTION

The main reason for my interest in conducting a research on Yemen is the fact that very little has been written about its recently discovered wealth of pre-Islamic and Islamic culture and its continuing medieval way of life. In addition, having spent some time in Yemen, and being moderately familiar with women's social and cultural environment in North America, I hoped to bring forward issues that would lead to solutions assisting women in their struggle for better conditions.

This thesis stems from my interest in conducting research about the art of the Yemenite women. My theoretical research, while yielding no references to the art of weaving, basketry, and pottery in Yemen proved fruitful on the social and political aspect of the Yemenite life. On the other hand, a review of the literature on the subject of WOMEN'S ART in the countries neighbouring Yemen yielded more data. Indeed, there were quite a few references to Bedouin women and their art of weaving, Dickson (1951), Weir (1976).

Based on the fact that the way of living of these Bedouins is quite similar to the rural people living in Yemen - both Yemenite and Bedouin women are responsible for and have monopoly on all the production of textiles and weaving and it is exclusively a female activity - I felt confident in drawing on the review of this literature while formulating my research about women and art in Yemen.

Moreover, since according to Digs (1967) the Bedouin are nomads or semi nomads that spread across the Arabic nations, along the coasts in the south and west of the peninsula, and to the northeast along the Mediterranean, it became even clearer that in researching the Bedouin art of weaving, I was in fact researching the art of weaving of the tribal Yemenite for which no written account exists as yet.

The story changed after arriving in Yemen. Theoretically, research seemed easy but in reality it was something else. After investigation I found that Bedouin women (weavers) do not exist in villages not even in the far accessible areas. As we know the Bedouin are always on the move in the desert part of Yemen. This means it is almost impossible to follow them.

This was far away and seemed a hard task for me. I was

living in the capital city Sana'a, and was occupied with teaching in a local school. My husband was working and my children going to school. I had only the weekends to spare for my research.

I noticed that baskets are available in abundance. Usually women were selling these baskets either sitting in the market area or carrying a huge amount of baskets on top of their heads and knocking on peoples doors to sell. This made me inquire about who is producing these baskets, and if women were the only producers.

At the same time I had established a friendship with a family in a close-by village, and later I discovered that their daughter was a basketmaker. While conveying the news of my research to my advisor, he recommended to switch to basaketry since field work about weaving is very difficult. So, from then I concentrated on basketry.

The information provided in this thesis was mainly collected among the women of village MATNAH, which is located 39 Km southwest of Yemen's capital city Sana'a and at an altitude of about 2700 meter(8860 feet). The people in this village are mostly farmers.

GLOSSARY

MATNAH	A Yemenite village which was the source of my research.
BARROWIYA	Village near MATNAH.
SIRARAH	A site where wild grass was obtained.
Mr. & Mrs. Hadad	The family with whom I interacted most during my research in village MATNAH.
Nidhal	Daughter of the Hadad family (My basketry teacher.)
Sohad	Neighbour of the Hadad family and best friend of Nidhal.
Shatha	Nidhal's mother in-law.
Hajar	First basket seller encountered.
Najat	A friend of Mrs. Hadad.
Rabab	Najat's mother (professional basketmaker in the village of BARROWIYA).

NOTES

1- All above mentioned names are not real in order to protect the privacy of the people I had encountered during my research.

2- During the following text, whenever I used the pronoun "We", it refers to the four members of my family i.e. my husband Dergham, my sons; Hayder, who is 14 years old; Leroy, who is 5 years old, and myself.

For the sake of giving a family image during our visits here and there, most of the time we were together in order to be accepted faster than being a single woman as well as for personal protection. This attitude we have acquired from our extensive traveling experience in Yemen .

Chapter 1

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

YEMEN

Yemen Arab Republic (Yem'en), often called North Yemen, and recently (May, 1990), after uniting with South Yemen, has become the Republic of Yemen. Yemen is a Middle Eastern country in the southwestern corner of the Arabian Peninsula. The country is bounded on the north and east by Saudi Arabia, on the south by South Yemen, and on the west by the Red Sea. Yemen has an area of approximately 194,250 sq.km. and a population estimated in 1990 as 7,993,000.

The climate in the semi-desert coastal strip (called Tihamah), which extends 32 to 80 Km inland from the Red Sea, is hot and humid. The green highlands rise to an elevation of 3760 meters and therefore makes it much cooler than the Tihamah, giving the area the best climate of the entire Arabian Peninsula. East of the mountains, the land slopes to the desert. Rainfall varies from 400-800 mm. annually.

The country's fertile interior is the most beautiful and best cultivated part of Arabia, its terraced slopes

receiving enough rain to make cultivation possible. Two major crops of Yemen are Coffee, once the country's chief source of foreign exchange, and Qat.

Qat is a very popular narcotic stimulant consumed by chewing the young leaves, leaf-buds, and tender shoots. In the cities of Yemen almost every house has a Qat-chewing room. The practice is almost universal and repeated day after day. The addicts experience a feeling of contentment, wakefulness and mental alertness. However, I have noticed that the teeth and gums become very foul, even causing some liver problems. Other socioeconomic results are a waste of time, money, land. The worst is that coffee-trees have been uprooted and Qat planted instead because it is more profitable.

Most of the people of Yemen are Arabs and Muslims. They are settled except few groups of nomads. The majority are farmers and craftworkers. Industry absorbs only about 5% of the work force, and employment in modern business is growing. Yemen has the highest national rate of adult illiteracy in Asia. According to estimates by UNESCO, the rate was 97.5% in 1962, but declined to 86.3% by 1985.

Arabia Felix(as the ancient Greeks and Romans called it) is an ancient center of civilization, the Cradle of Arab. It was only at the end of the 19th century that archaeologists began to discover the monumental ruins and the inscriptions that revealed the importance of the ancient Kingdom of Sheba, which existed from the 5th century B.C. It represents a high point of prosperity and development in classical times.

In recent centuries, the severe isolation of Yemen has been due to the result of the closed door policy of its leaders keeping out foreigners as well as their modern innovations. The aim was to keep the country free from foreign interference and secure its traditional religious way of life as a form of power. This policy, however, was not feasible since Yemen was not economically self-sufficient and depended on other countries for numerous basic products. The situation has been changing since Yemen was declared a Republic in 1962.

According to the World Bank, in the 1980's Yemen was among the economically least-developed countries in the world. With a great deal of help from international agencies and other countries, Yemen is now trying to deal with

the obstacles that hindered its development: an underdeveloped economy, poor communications, bad health conditions, and a traditional education system. Moreover, according to the United Nations, Yemen is one of the six poorest nations of the world.

ARAB WOMEN

Research according to UNESCO's Social Science research on Women in the Arab World (1984) indicates that the status of women varies considerably between Arab nations. The image of Arab Muslim women is now much different from what orientalists and missionaries, who were mostly men with little or no access to the world of women, had conveyed to westerners in the past; women are invested with the duty of sexual intercourse, i.e., as silent creatures born to suffer fertility and hard work.

Mernissi(1975) examines how the Muslim women's life has been changing where it is no longer confined to home and children, and how modernization is affecting those changes. In some Arab countries, a noticeable percentage of urban women are well educated, work outside the home, and are able

to decide on issues with regards to their lives, including childbirth. In these same countries as well as less developed ones, poor women and rural women have fewer options. A woman's status, even in the least developed countries, varies among other things according to class, urban/rural location and religion.

YEMENITE WOMEN

Women in Yemen can be generally looked at on two different levels, the urban women and the rural women(Al-Attar, 1965). Rural women do not suffer strict seclusion as urban women do. They have, however, less leisure time than urban women. Their life conditions are much more difficult and their existence much harsher than urban women (Makhlouf, 1979).

Before the Revolution of 1962, education for the urban female was restricted to reading the Quran at home and did not include writing, except for a few privileged upper class women. Education for a rural female was non existent. However, at the present time schools are spreading in many villages and females have a better opportunity to obtain

elementary education. According to estimates by UNESCO, the adult literacy of women was 3.1% in 1985.

YEMENITE URBAN WOMEN

In the pre-Islamic period, at the time of King Solomon, Yemen had a very strong and intelligent stateswoman (Queen Sheba, circa 950 B.C.). Also during the Islamic period, around 1100 A.D., Queen Arwa governed Yemen for more than 40 years. Yet, it is in the same Yemen that until very recently only some women were allowed to work outside the house, and the majority of women were thus limited to familial roles. Omer(1970) states that a certain class of the society (a backward and bigoted group) had played a major role in imposing the image of women as being a mere source of joy and service to the man.

Urban women have experienced various degrees of seclusion and veiling in the Yemenite society (Makhlouf, 1979). What is generally referred to as the veil consists in fact of several parts, each having a special name and usage. Every woman living in the city must wear the veil, even though veiling certainly constitutes an obstacle to the free

expression of women as persons, and a device which, at least apparently, reduces all women to anonymous figures.

YEMENITE RURAL WOMEN

A rural woman helps her husband significantly working in the fields. In addition, she performs the widest range of activities as well as being in charge of all house-work. So, she is exploited and suffers much more than her husband does; her health deteriorates quickly (Al-Attar, 1965).

Kenneth (1968) stated that "women in the Western Desert do not wear the permanent veil, but leave the black crepe headpiece loose, so that it can be pulled across the face in the presence of strange men". This applies to rural Yemenite women who are mostly unveiled, the opposite urban women. It is enough to travel couple of kilometers out of the city to notice this .

ART OF YEMEN

Yemeni popular art may be regarded as a living manifestation of the cultural existence of the Yemenite people and a permanent indication of the culture's considerable ability to contribute to civilization (Al-Haddad, 1982).

Many goods in the country are still made by hand. The people weave and dye cloth, and make rope, glassware, harness, saddles and pottery. Yemenite craftsmen have been famous for their textiles, leatherwork, and ironwork since ancient times. They sell their goods in the village marketplaces (The World Book Encyclopedia, 1990).

The crafts in fact represent a major part of cottage industry. They include, in addition to what was mentioned above, brass, gold and silver jewelry, traditional weapons such as swords and the janabi (a type of decorative dagger worn by men), and cooking utensils (either from carved stone or baked clay). Besides, embroidery and basketry.

I found only one reference that mentions the existence

of baskets in Yemen, and that also included a photograph of a woman selling baskets in Mansouria (a village in the Tihamah near the Red Sea). " In the Tihama, a major activity is the weaving of goods such as hats, baskets and netting out of the leaves of the doum palm (Marechaux, 1980)." However, the material, shape, and technique followed in making these baskets are completely different from the basketry studied in this thesis.

Chapter 2

R E S E A R C H M E T H O D

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research through phenomenological perspectives is the methodology I prefer when conducting research in Art Education. I have three concerns when conducting research which depend upon this theoretical perspective. They are as follows: a) What to look for in the research, b) how to behave in the research situation, and c) how to interpret the product of my research.

The perspective I take in understanding any situation will reflect qualitative approaches that tend towards on a phenomenological point of view. In order to grasp the meaning of a person's behaviour, my task is to attempt to see things from that person's point of view. To do this requires "verstehen, empathic understanding or an ability to reproduce in one's own mind the feelings, motives, and thoughts behind the actions of others (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, p.14)." This process allowed me to know the tribal women of Yemen on a personal level. As a participant observer, I experienced what they experience in their daily struggle and was able to listen to and write about it.

In my theoretical research, however I have not found any reference to the art of basketry. The literature dealt only with the social and political aspect of their life. Thus, the only way to get data is from the original source—that is the natural setting of the basketry. This is one important characteristic of qualitative research according to Bogdan and Biklen (1982) .

As qualitative researcher, I am concerned with the context. I feel that action can be better understood when it is observed in the setting in which it occurs. To separate the act or gesture from its context is to lose sight of its significance.

The non-verbal language of photo-realism is the kind of communication that is best understood interculturally and cross-culturally, Collier (1967)., Harper, Douglas, (1987). This ease of recognition is the basic reason my camera was of such importance in my research. This project must also be able to reach different audiences who were illiterate and whose language of communication is Arabic rather than English.

As a qualitative researcher, I have no hypotheses to prove or disprove, so I had not searched for data or evidence to support a particular position . As previously mentioned, I have some questions and areas of interest that I pursued as soon as I entered the field. This part of the work is rather like constructing a picture, which took shape as I collected and examined the data throughout the course of my study.

PROCEDURE

Having located the village - MATNAH - in which the observational process was conducted I prepared a variety of descriptive operations, including maps, in order to establish the physical and environmental context, and outline the shape of the Yemenite culture. This should form a frame of reference within which the structured research goals can be accomplished.

My research project is to be descriptive and narrative. The data was collected in the form of words as well as photographs. I relied on my memory to gather written data

during my observation and recorded detailed notes soon after leaving the field.

As a qualitative researcher, I was also concerned with the process rather than simply with products. A process must be photographed so exact steps can be isolated. It is through this systematic observation that I planned and documented the art of basketry, which is ritualistically carried out in the traditional manner.

Since I was unable to find a basketmaker willing to be observed, I followed a suggestion made by Collier in Visual Anthropology: Photograph as a Research Method. The idea is to commission a basket and then explain to the basketmaker that because of peculiar circumstances it is necessary to photograph the material at every stage, from the raw materials to the finished product.

I was lucky to have found a woman who accepted me as a student and taught me basket-making. In this way I learned exactly what information is passed from the basketmaker to her daughter or other female relative. This also helped me to understand the underlying codes of women at different stages of the process.

STAGES OF THE ACTUAL RESEARCH

My research was conducted in three stages; firstly, I commissioned a basketmaker to teach me how to make a basket. The process of basketmaking was partially documented due to the great difficulty encountered in persuading women to be photographed. This stage is presented, hereafter, in coloured slides. During this stage I have also observed woman's environment, her way of living, relationship with her family and neighbours, children and education. The women I associated with were villagers who had moved to the city. Their baking, cooking, washing, sewing and mending, cleaning of the wheat and grinding it, they practiced a lifestyle informed by both city and village traditions.

The second stage of my research was carried out in the village Matnah when another basket was commissioned, this time with the premission to do photo documentation. Here I was able to make black and white prints of the work steps in more detail than in the first stage. Unlike the first basket, where the wrapping was made of plain wild grass, this second basket was made with green and red coloured wild grass in addition to the natural plain grass. During this stage I also observed different aspects of women's life

in the village. Women seemed to be free to go out of the house, for instance, to the fields, to fetch water from the well, collect firewood, milk animals besides caring for their children and their housework. This stage is illustrated in this thesis by Black and white photographs.

As for the final stage of my research, I succeeded in making a complete videotape of the whole process of the dying and colouring of wild grass as well as making a saucer-shaped basket. This was with the help of a woman also from MATNAH.

Chapter 3

F I E L D W O R K S T O R Y

In Yemen I noticed that baskets were available in markets in abundance. Usually women were selling these baskets, either sitting in the market area or carrying a huge amount of baskets on top of their heads and knocking on peoples' doors to sell. This made me inquire about who is producing these baskets, and if women only were the producers.

Women are not permitted to speak to strangers, therefore, it was not easy to talk to them specially when men were present. Despite the fact that I was familiar with the local language, getting an answer from the people in general was difficult. Always evasive answers were given when asking about the source of these baskets. Sometimes people would say that these baskets come from remote villages that are inaccessible by car.

One day while my husband was driving in the city he saw one of the women selling these baskets and bought one. He also asked the woman to go to our address. Later this woman

came to our house and this was the beginning of knowing something about the sources of these products.

I was very careful to act properly with this woman (Hajar). It was about 11 a.m., when the sun becomes very hot, so I offered her a rose-water drink (a special drink usually considered in Arab countries as a drink for happiness and special occasions). Soon Hajar felt at home and therefore started telling me her life story and gradually came to tell a little bit about baskets and where could be obtained.

Hajar got married at the age of 11 and started with her husband to work hard in order to collect money for their future. After sometime, suddenly she discovered that her husband took the savings and married a young girl. This was when Hajar reached the age of 40. So, now she is living with her son, as a divorced woman, trying to make some money by selling baskets which she buys from remote villages.

As per Hajar's directions, which I discovered later were not completely true, I visited few villages and asked about basket works. It was in vain, because every one I

met in those villages was giving me false information. I should mention here that in general the people in Yemen do not give away information to strangers. However, I remembered something that Hajar mentioned while talking about the relative of her ex-husband that they come from a village called MATNAH. And what a coincidence that MATNAH eventually became the main source of my research

MATNAH is a village of about 500 people. It is located at a distance of 39 Km SW of Sana'a- the capital city of Yemen. The climate is marvelous because MATNAH has an altitude of about 2600 meter(8,500 feet) above sea level. So it is situated in a mountainous area, and the land is very fertile. There could be three harvests in one year, so it is always green. People dig wells to obtain their water, and each group of people have their own pump and pipe system to distribute water to fields and houses. All houses are built of stone.

It took me about 18 months during which I was regularly visiting this village and get to know couple of families who finally trusted me. Then I was able to ask about basket works. It happened when I was invited to the Hadad family,

who eventually became very good friends with me and my family. There I saw number of baskets hanged in the sitting room to decorate the walls. After asking about the source of these baskets, Mrs. Hadad told me that they get them from another village called BARROWIYA, and she offered to take me there. I was very excited and happy, so we agreed on a time to go together to BARROWIYA.

RESEARCHING IN BARROWIYA & OTHER VILLAGES

The route to BARROWIYA was the most adventurous trip I have ever been on during my life. It took us about 2 hours to drive only 10 Km. This was the distance from the asphalt road to the village. Besides using animals or going on foot, only a strong 4-wheel drive jeep car could make it to BARROWIYA. We had to drive through river beds in valleys or through very rough and rocky paths on the mountain.

Along with Mrs. Hadad, there was Najat, a young daughter of the family from whom we were going to buy basket. I found out that Najat was 4 months pregnant, and I was

afraid that she may have a miscarriage, but she was calm and enjoying being in a car. Then both women told me that most people in these areas travel back and forth either on foot or using mules. This seemed to be a safer method, though time consuming.

It was such a relief to arrive safely to the village. But, suddenly the idea of going back struck me and made me think about what to do? I thought of what the two women said about going on foot or using animal transportation, and decided to do that. However, I was obliged to go back by car the same day for two reasons: it was too late to go on foot and the sanitation made it difficult to stay overnight.

Anyhow, the head of the village welcomed us very kindly and invited us for lunch at his house which was very modest. He also offered us to be his guest any time we visit his village. It was such a scene, where almost all the villagers, about a hundred, were out watching us. It was a great show to them. We took few photos together and walked around to see the area.

Finally, Mrs. Hadad took us to Rabab - the woman who made baskets . She lives in a house which looks like a cave. One side of her house was the mountain; and the rest of the walls were built of stones collected locally. At first we entered what is called the guest room, which was dark and small. As soon as I sat and turned my face to the wall, I saw a black scorpion just next to my head. So immediately I jumped out of the room leaving my purse behind. I ran for my life and preferred to stay outside giving an excuse to the host that I prefer to enjoy nature.

Rabab, then, took us to her work room. It was a horrible and scary space, yet full of beautiful baskets. The ceiling was made of branches, leaves and clay. It was dim, filthy and full of spider webs. I looked at all of her work and chose a few baskets to buy. When RABAB became sure that I was buying, she started explaining where to get the grass, how to dry it, dye it and how to coil it.

There was an unfinished basket, which I wanted to buy, but Rabab refused at the beginning and then hesitatingly agreed to sell . It was not easy for me to understand why she was reluctant to sell the unfinished basket, while her

aim in producing this work is to make money.

It is worthwhile to mention here some of the habits of the villagers in Yemen which related to selling and buying. A villager considers selling his/her products, such as crop yield or handicraft, as shame. They could trade things but not buy or sell. This is to show their independence and the ability to survive almost without money.

Recently, the need for money has appeared because they can then acquire certain materials , equipments and variety of food. Therefore, as an example, baskets became one of the products that villagers started selling. Many people need them for their practicality at home, and not every woman can make them due to the difficult process.

The idea of doing my research in BARROWIYA was almost impossible due to many reasons: 1) it was very dangerous for me to go alone on that route, 2) it was not possible to go and return on the same day 3) I could not accept the idea of living there even for a short time being scared of insects and lizards that appear at night, 4) photo documentation was

impossible because RABAB refused any photography either of her or her work, as she considered that a taboo.

Despite all the above mentioned reasons, I retained the idea of carrying out my research in BARROWIYA just in case nothing elsewhere was possible. Meanwhile I continued looking for other possibilities in MATNAH and other places.

Among the other villages that I tried with no results were SHIBAM, KAWKABAN, TAWILAH, RAWDAH, THULA. The reaction of the people was always the same; I could not reach women; people would deny the fact that there is such art work being done; people would divert me to other places far from their village; men were afraid that their women would become known as making and selling baskets.

FOCUSING ON MATNAH

While visiting other villages, I continued going to MATANH regularly, hoping to strengthen my relationship with the Hadads' family. I was very sincere in my relationship towards this family and they felt it. For instance, when any of them got sick, I took them to the nearest hospital in my

car. I always encouraged the children to care for their school and studies, and taught the girls how to cook certain dishes. Also, I never visited without bringing them some necessary things from the city .

During one of my visits to the Hadads, I expressed my wish to learn how to make a basket. Mrs. Hadad responded in a very positive way by saying that her daughter-Nidal- could teach me basketmaking. This was the first time that such a thing was mentioned in front of me. I was thrilled and overjoyed to hear that. At the same time, Mrs. Hadad seemed to be satisfied because she often expressed her desire to reward me for whatever I have offered them.

Nidal is 19 years old, who is engaged to a young man living in the city. For long time Nidal refused to accept proposals from men through her parents. She believed that marriage will limit her to the house, while she is now free to go out to the fields any time she likes. She always likes to be out of the house. This was her nature. She would make any excuse to leave the house, to get grass to feed the cattle even if it were not needed , to fetch water even if they have enough at home.

Nidal does not make baskets in order to sell, but only to provide her family and her close relatives with some baskets for their daily use. So, her basketmaking is done on an irregular basis. Therefore, I had to be patient with her until she decided when to start teaching me.

When I was back from my summer vacation I went to visit the village MATNAH to find out that Nidal had been married and had moved away from the village. It was a disappointment, for I had brought some gifts and had in mind to pay Nidal some money which might encourage her to start teaching me. So, I gave the money and the gifts to the mother. The mother told me that Nidal lived somewhere near the city, and encouraged me to visit her.

While talking to the mother, I found out that the father in-law of Nidal was visiting his property in MATNAH. So, the mother introduced me to him and asked him to take me to Nidal. He was very pleased to do so. We followed his truck, and this was of great help because finding an address is not easy specially in the area where Nidal was living now.

STAGE I

NIDAL'S NEW ENVIRONMENT

Nidal lives in the same house where her in-laws live. This is a custom in Yemen, specially when the groom is young and having low income. So, there was the father in law, his wife, and seven children (1-13 years). Also, Nidal, her husband and his sister, who were from a deceased wife.

It is necessary to describe Nidal's new environment in her husband's house, so one could imagine the misery a human being could endure. Also to show the difficulty met in carrying out this research. The house consists of three rooms having a total area of 80 square meters, an open yard partially used as a terrace and the rest as a storage of fire wood .

As for the bathroom, it is very small and dark . One has to bend in order to enter. The toilet is just a hole in the ground. A bucket full of water is used for washing. Next to the bathroom, Cooking is done in a half closed space of about 4 square meters. It contains a clay oven to make bread, and a gas stove. In this space there is the only water tap in the house.

The place is a complete mess. The father had a piece of land, decided to have a house, so he built it by himself. There is not a single touch of beauty in this dwelling. It was always filthy, stinking and full of insects. I never took my children to this place to avoid disease. After each visit to these people and returning to my house, I had to disinfect my clothes and take a shower.

Nidal was not happy at all after marriage because: (a) there were many restrictions set by her husband, (b) the atmosphere of the house was depressing, (c) she was limited to only house work, (d) she was missing her village lifestyle. Therefore, when I visited for the first time, Nidal was overjoyed. She often told her family and friends that, "Milook is an old friend, who used to visit us in the village. Milook reminds me of my joyful premarital life."

During my first visit to Nidal, we agreed in the presence of her mother and sister in-law to start teaching me basketmaking as soon as possible. Also, I tried to arrange my visits while the father in-law and the husband were away because I knew that they would cause problems.

The first thing was to get the raw material, i.e., foundation materials (barley stalks) and wrapping materials (wild grass), which are not sold in the market. I had to make a trip to MATNAH for some materials, which I obtained from Mrs. Hadad and from her neighbour SOHAD. This was on the condition that I should take them one day to the place where they usually go for grass-picking.

I suggested to Nidal that we use the outdoor space as a place to work for me to avoid fleas and lice which fill the indoor and to be able to photograph without a flash light. Nidal brought me a new blanket to sit on outside.

On our first lesson, Nidal's husband was present. In a very proud manner, he told me about his graduation from high school and his application to the military college. So, I told him, since you believe in education, then Nidal should also get her share of education in order to be able to bring up good children.

Nidal's husband resentfully said, "You are welcome to our house any time". But, he emphasized that I keep my progressive ideas about society and women to myself and not

to brain wash Nidal while she is teaching me. He also mentioned a Yemenite proverb " If you want to keep your wife faithful to you then do not educate her. If you want to lose her then send her to school".

Towards the end of our conversation, NIDAL's husband said," You should help me get admission to the college, and to teach me English." He expressed it in such a way that meant: since NIDAL is teaching you basketmaking , then you have to reward me. So, I promised to bring him some books about learning English.

I had to be very careful in my conversation with Nidal specially when her husband was around, as she was wearing two different personalities. In front of her husband, she expressed her disgust of education; while in his absence, she showed her eagerness to learn how to read and write.

Nidal's mother-in-law (Shatha) decided to join an illiteracy program 6 years ago and she managed to hide it from her husband for couple of years. When her husband discovered that, he became furious but finally accepted due to Shatha's persistence and threats to leave their children

and return to her parents' home. This has encouraged NIDAL to secretly start learning.

Shatha is now in grade 6 and her aim is to graduate and become a teacher. During daily life Shatha is a great teacher. She spends most of her free time teaching her children and neighbour's children reading and writing. She also tries to inform the children about some living matters. Meanwhile, she does her homework.

Shatha was very happy to see me supporting her ideas, especially education, because all neighbours discouraged her for wasting her time in going to school. Mockingly, they would repeat a widely used proverb, " Only when you get very old, can education be provided." This proverb has a negative view for people who believe that one should start learning from childhood and not when one gets older. SHATHA always replied by quoting a tradition from Islam: " Pursue knowledge from birth till death."

Nidal always watched what Shatha was doing concerning teaching the children and herself. This has encouraged Nidal to be courageous enough to pick up a pencil and start drawing letters and words. But, she kept it hidden from her

husband. I managed to provide Nidal and Shatha with as much stationary as they needed.

I explained to Nidal that it is very important for me to photo-document the whole process of basketmaking, so that whenever I need any information about basketry, I could go back to these photos. She had no objection, but I knew her husband would be against it.

Nidal agreed to be photographed only when we are alone. So, I had to hide the camera each time somebody showed up. Nidal was very scared each time I took the camera out of my bag, and would look left and right to see if anybody was coming, because this could create serious problems for her and prevent me from entering their house.

The fear behind taking photographs comes from different traditions and religious beliefs. Clergymen, unfortunately, misinterpreted the holy word of Quran regarding pictures and considered the photographing of women as taboo, despite what is stated in Quran that women can uncover their faces and hands.

Some of the people disagree with what clergymen say however, they still prohibit women's photography to avoid having their women's photos in the hands of others, especially if the woman wears a veil in her daily life. Due to this attitude, women panic whenever someone tries to face a camera towards them.

After a few visits, the whole neighborhood became curious to see who I was, and what I was doing in this area. So, women started coming in to find out what was happening. Women along with their youngsters, according to Yemenite culture, would feel free to drop into their neighbour's house without any previous notice. This was a major problem as I was always surrounded by three women or more, which meant an interruption of my photographing, because of my agreement with Nidal that photography be carried out only when we were alone.

Women in the neighborhood learned for the first time that Nidal can make baskets. Despite the fact that these women were impressed, yet as usual, they were mocking me for coming to learn basketmaking from Nidal. But I tried my best untill they accepted Nidal like any other teacher; I am her first student. Also, I encouraged those women to come

and learn. And since they meet each morning, I suggested a regular class to learn basketry. This made Nidal and her family very proud.

Nidal's mother and sister in-law expressed their interest and eagerness to learn basketmaking. Nidal was happy to hear that. She decided to bring out several unfinished baskets that she brought with her from the village, and to continue working on them with the help of her in-laws. Until then, Nidal hesitated to show her baskets, which were part of her regular daily life. Now, Nidal felt better for being able to practice her previous hobby.

The presence of women, on one hand was positive, as they began to learn facts about different life issues. We discussed health, cleaning, cooking, women's rights, literacy and basketmaking. On the other hand, it was negative as time was passing without being able to make any photographs. So I asked Nidal what I should do ? She suggested that since her parents had no objection to photographing her in the village, then we could arrange a weekend to go to MATNAH where I could photo document the whole process of baksetmaking.

Unfortunately our plan did not work out the first time because (a) Nidal's husband, who is against photography, insisted on coming along with us and (b) since it was her first visit to the village after marriage, many of her relatives and friends came to see her. The only good thing was meeting Nidal's close friend called Sohad, who used to go with us on grass-picking.

Another approach that I tried was to always take with me clothes and other gifts to Nidal's in-laws to keep them busy while I took some slides of the basketmaking process. Despite that, I could only succeed in taking a very few shots; I had to hide the camera each time I heard any movement.

Having tried several ways, during a six-months period, to make photographs, and having failed to obtain an opportunity to do so, I decided to take a risk. That was to shoot as many slides as possible during a one day visit to Nidal's house. I kept in mind that this might be my last visit if Nidal's husband discovers me photographing in his house.

Nidal took all the necessary precautions such as locking all doors and pulling down window curtains. After

a few slides, Shatha returned from shopping and it did not surprise her to see me taking photographs. Nidal insisted on having Shatha with her in some slides. She also wanted me to make slides of her sister in-law. The idea was that , if her husband discovers us, then it is not only her who had been photographed but Shatha and her sister in-law.

Although Nidal was very scared and worried, Shatha took the matter easily and asked me to make photos of the children, the house and herself. Shatha posed holding a basket in her hand showed that she is the basketmaker. She repeatedly was saying not to worry about the men. " Nobody will tell them ", and looking at her children, she said " they will never get to know what we are doing."

Slindos

Slide 5

Side.

1 of 5

Slide

STAGE II

BLACK & WHITE DOCUMENTATION OF BASKETMAKING WITH NIDAL

In November 1989, when my husband got very sick, we had to leave within a month. I had no choice but to be content with whatever research achieved during the past period in Yemen, and I had to forget about what I could do if I have more time. Luckily something happened that changed the whole situation of my research.

One day, I went to visit Nidal. I was surprised to hear that she was not there. Because her mother was sick, she had to go to the village MATNAH to look after her mother and do house and field work. This is a Yemenite custom for the married daughter to go and attend her mother's affairs at a time of sickness , difficulties or happiness.

The same day, I drove to the village where the Hadad family lives. Mrs. Hadad was in bed having high fever and suffering from pains in her legs and back. While talking to the mother, Nidal entered and said, " While working in the field, I saw your car and came running to greet you." Nidal

joyfully added that she is staying in the village for a week.

She seemed to be a different person. Always smiling, joking and talking just the opposite of how she behaves in her husband's house. This is because, according to their culture, a newly wed bride should be shy, serious , hard working and obedient to her husband and in-laws.

Nidal immediately brought some grass to start a basket and said to me, " Now you can take as many photos as you want." Since I had recently found and purchased a quantity of black and white films, I quickly made some photographs (though it was getting late in the day). Soon I had to stop, hoping to continue the next day.

I always went with my family to MATNAH (on a weekend or holidays) because it is safer to be with somebody during such visits. Suddenly, as I had to go to MATNAH every day of the week that was not possible. We have one car and my husband needed it in the city for his work. I would not go alone by taxi on such a trip; also I was not able to find a friend that would accompany me by taxi to MATNAH.

Finally, we agreed that I take our car, and let my husband rent a taxi on a daily basis during his routine visits to construction sites. I had to drive carefully because it was a narrow mountainous route with a regular traffic of cargo trucks. There were two police check points in my way to MATNAH, where I had to stop and show my identification. I used to show them my Yemenite driving licence, which was the only document written in Arabic.

I arrived MATNAH to see that Mrs. Hadad's health had deteriorated, so I offered to take her to the hospital. She did not feel able to walk; however, I arranged to carry her to the car and off to the hospital, which was close to the village. In that hospital, I knew a doctor friend who immediately examined Mrs. Hadad and gave us some medicine. It seemed to be a heavy flu.

On that day I could not work with Nidal on basketmaking. However, the next day was even worse because Nidal's husband surprised us all by coming to see his mother in-law. Nidal was working on a basket, and I was totally engaged in taking photographs of every step of the process. Suddenly I saw Nidal's face go pale and her eyes widely

open. I managed to hide my camera under my jacket and sat down on the floor full of fear.

There were about seven members of Nidal's family gathered around us. After greeting all of them, Nidal's husband turned to me with many questions about my work. I managed to remove my camera from under my jacket to my hand bag while Nidal's husband turned his head to talk to Mr.Hadad. Only after that did I feel relaxed and able to breath again. Looking at Nidal, I saw her face regain its normal colour.

This sudden visit made everybody curious and worried about whether Nidal's husband had come to take her back home. Mrs. Hadad was getting upset, but soon Nidal discussed the matter with her husband and informed us all that she was not going back until next week. So, I left since we were not going to work anymore today while Nidal's husband was there.

The following few days went well. Our program went as follows: I usually arrived to the village around 9 a.m.; by then Nidal had worked for about 4 hours in the field. Then I would help her to bake some bread; many times I prepared food in my house and took it with me so Nidal would not need

to worry about cooking for the family. Then we would concentrate on basketmaking.

The weather during the month of November was cool but sunny, so it was just beautiful to sit and work outdoor to enjoy the sun despite the filthy surrounding. Flies were all over the place, goats roaming around us drinking from the water used to soak the grass.

We were always surrounded by many members of the family such as Nidal's grandmother, parents, sisters, nieces, nephews and some neighbours. The conversation would normally cover harvest, animals, family, children, food and daily events in the village and in their homes. Sometimes, the elders told stories about their past and tried to compare it with today's life.

We managed to finish a small saucer-shaped basket of about 8 inches in diameter. The pattern of this basket was different from any traditional one. The reasons I thought were:

A) When Nidal's husband arrived on that day, Nidal was just introducing the coloured grass on the fifth row of the

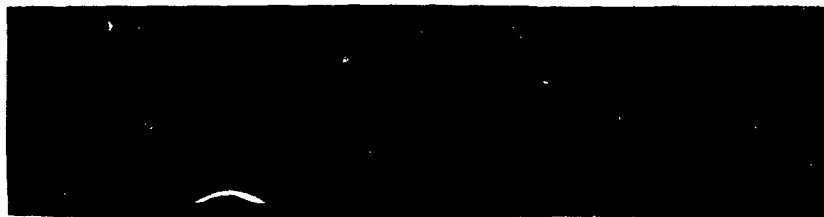
basket. The presence of her husband had such an effect that one could notice a confusion in the design.

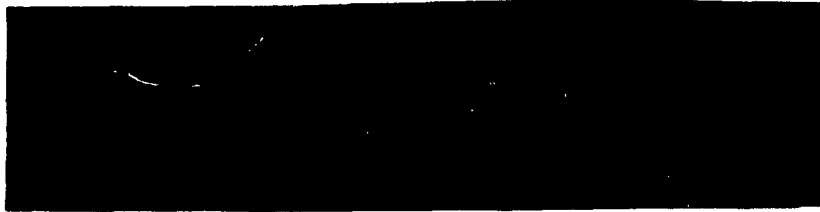
B) Whenever Nidal was occupied with other things in the house, two women and myself participated in making this basket.

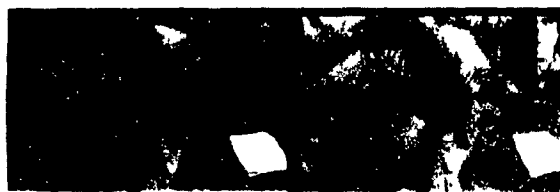
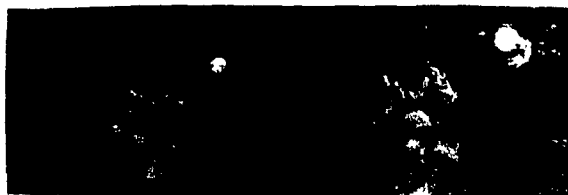
Nidal was not happy about this result, but to me this was not of as much importance as being able to finish a complete basket including the photography without any problems or delay. Despite all of that, I found out later that the pattern was really beautiful and could be considered as a free style pattern. To me this represents the freedom of women from the repressive customs of society.

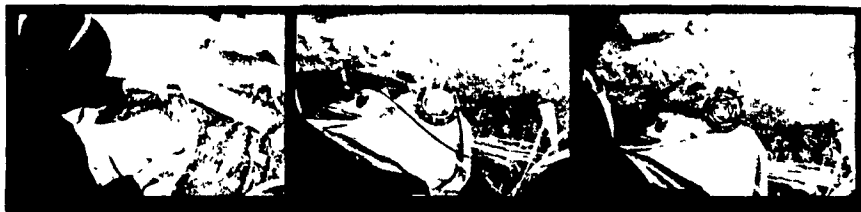
S t a g e I I
Basketmaking With Nidal

















STAGE III

USING VIDEO CAMERA TO RECORD DYEING & COLOURING

By now, I had made a good collection of slides and black & white prints of the process of grass picking and basketmaking. What was left was the dyeing and colouring of the grasses. Sohad offered to show me how to dye the grass and what materials were used. She also mentioned that her husband had no objection to photography.

I wondered why Sohad and her husband made this offer. Sohad has seven daughters and one son. Her husband is often unemployed, so they have a difficult life. Food (cereals and vegetables) come from the Hadad's family; in exchange Sohad and her daughters help in farming and house work.

Sohad came to know about the gifts and money I gave to the Hadad's family. So, in order to get similar treatment, she may have made this offer. I did not disappoint her. Firstly, I paid her for her work. Secondly, since I had to leave the country unexpectedly, I gave Sohad lots of new things which I had recently brought from Canada to Yemen ,

things like clothes, shoes, blankets, sheets, cutlery, pots, plates and toys.

Having considered Sohad's offer, I planned to document this process on videotape. Red and green are the two colours most often used in baskets. I thought that villagers use natural materials to colour the grass, because I remember from my preliminary research that Bedouin women prepare their dying materials by soaking and boiling certain plants or peels of some vegetables that are obtained from the surrounding.

I thought that we would have to harvest and collect certain plants to be used for colouring. But Sohad directed me to a shop in the village and said, " Go and get TARSHAH from that shop." I thought that TARSHAH was the name of some plants used to make colouring.

So, I went and asked the shop-owner for some TARSHAH. The man opened two paper sacks each of about 1 Kilogram capacity. He filled two table spoons from the contents of each paper sack and filled 2 tiny plastic see-through bags. The TARSHAH was a kind of coloured powder. One was red and the other was green. I asked him, " What is this?" He

said, "It is colouring for the grass." Then I said, "Where do you get it from? I asked to see the label? The man said, "No, I am sorry but that is how we get it."

Then, I understood that this was material smuggled into Yemen from neighboring countries. Such materials would not usually have their original packing bags or boxes. The colouring powder was a kind of chemical product "imported" for this purpose.

Anyhow, I had agreed with Sohad to come to her house so she could start teaching me how to dye the grass. I arrived in the morning with my video camera and sat in a small room, which was very dark. I thought that it was not going to be easy to Video inside that tiny room. Also, I was scared to go out to the terrace of their house because neighbours would see us while making the video.

It is worth mentioning here that low-income families build their houses in several stages. First they build two rooms. One room as a bedroom, and the other as a living room. When they save some more money, they add another part such as another bedroom or a working room. Luckily, Sohad's

family had just finished adding a spacious and well-lit room with seven windows.

Sohad hesitated to ask me to work in that room because it was still damp from the gypsum used to plaster the walls. Also, they had no curtains which meant that there was less privacy. However, as soon as I entered and expressed my admiration of the newly built space, Sohad asked her daughter to bring a mattress and put it in the middle of the room. Next day, I arranged curtains for the seven windows and this became our working space.

Sohad brought a portable gas stove and borrowed a gas cylinder from her neighbour. She brought a tin box filled with water and started boiling it. When the water boiled, she poured the colouring material of one of the plastic bags (green tarshah), stirred it, picked up a bundle of dried grass and soaked it in the solution. She let it boil for about 10 minutes during which she continued stirring with a branch-stick. A handful of sugar was added to the solution in order, as the woman believed, to get bright colour.

When Sohad saw the grass was getting coloured, she took it out from the container and wrapped it with a plastic

sheet in order to keep it moist. She emptied the container, washed it thoroughly then filled it with fresh water. Sohad followed the same steps to dye another amount of dried grass in red. Unfortunately the red Tarshah did not work as well as the green , probably due to the quality of the colouring material (red tarshah).

MAKING A SAUCER-SHAPED BASKET WITH SOHAD

My video camera has a play-back feature which allowed Sohad and her friends to see themselves on a small screen right after shooting each step. This gave Sohad the encouragement to continue working. She offered to make a basket with the newly coloured grass. However, since it took us almost the whole day to finish the dyeing process, we had to postpone making the basket untill the next day.

Early morning, the next day, I went to the village, keeping in mind that, no matter what happens, I should have a basket ready by the end of the day. So I explained to Sohad that, today, we should try our best to complete a saucer-shaped basket, because it is not always possible to make video without men's objection. Despite the fact that Sohad's husband had already allowed me to photograph his wife, I was afraid that other people in the area would hear about this and they might influence the opinion of Sohad's husband.

We had already borrowed some foundation materials (barley stalks) from Mrs. Hadad. As for the wrapping

material (coloured grass), we found out that the red colour was coming off, leaving the grass its original colour. Sohad was not happy about not having red grass in her basket because she is used to have green and red. However, I assured her that a combination of green and natural grass colours would also make a beautiful basket.

Sohad started making the basket. Around her were already few women and many children who came to see what was happening. Meanwhile, I begun shooting my video tape. Some of the women were wondering why a basket was being made without red colour. And Sohad, who did not believe in doing it, was telling the women why there was no red. Anyhow, at the end of the day Mrs. Hadad came and offered us some red grass in order to have at least the last row in red. Sohad was very pleased about this.

Sohad followed the same steps that Nidal did in basket-making. She incorporated, however, a pattern in the last row of the basket, using a wrapped loop which she made from uncoloured wild grass as foundation and coloured wild grass as wrapping. This was stitched, at equal spaces, to the basket's edge using fibers of nylon strand.

Although the edge pattern was not yet finished, I asked Sohad to stop and let me have the basket, because it was getting late, and I had to return to the city. Sohad was very concerned about finishing the basket. So, she said, "Are you going to finish it? I answered, " Yes God willing, I shall finish it at home." Deep in my heart I just wanted to take the basket and leave before any obstruction occurred. I could hardly believe myself, videotaping the basketmaking process. Something which was impossible to do was now achieved!

Two days before leaving Yemen, I went to the village of MATNAH to say good-bye to my friends. Women and children gathered around me celebrating my visit as usual. They wished me best of luck and hoped to meet again. I gave Sohad and Nidal many coloured prints of photos made during previous visits with them. Some of the women were so excited and happy, for it was the first time in their life to be photographed.

Chapter 4

OBTAINING THE WRAPPING MATERIALS

Wild Grass Picking (Trip to SIRARAH)

Nidal had informed her family and her friend Sohad that whenever I manage to get a 4 wheel drive car they could take me to pick some grass . She also explained to them that I needed to photograph them while they were picking, binding and carrying the grass.

We managed to get a car and drove to MATNAH. There we had to wait for Mrs. Hadad and Sohad to come with us on the promised trip to SIRARAH- grass picking. Two other women accompanied us, because we had extra space in the car. So we were six adults and 4 children.

Luckily I had brought with me some drinking water, sandwiches and cake. Nidal's sister gave us some freshly baked bread. I was not sure how long the trip would take, and in what direction the place was located. Even Nidal and her friends could not describe the location . They just knew how to get there.

At the beginning it was a dirt road, but soon as we

climbed higher to about 3000 meter(10,000 feet) above sea level, the road became very rough until there was not any sign of what could be considered a road. At the end we reached a flat area on top of the mountain, where fields of wheat and barley were everywhere. The car could not go further.

We did not know what to do. We have heard of many stories about stealing cars and running away to villages. I did not want to leave my husband and the children guarding the car while I went with the women to an unknown place. To tell the truth, I was scared . I thought, if anything happens, then it would be better to be together. So we decided to leave the car and start walking.

Each one of us carried something; water container, food basket, cameras and even children, who could not walk very long at a time. After walking for about 30 minutes through the fields, we suddenly were in front of a very high cliff looking down to a deep valley. Then Sohad pointed to the bottom of the valley and said, " Over there !"

We started descending almost vertically through a very

rough mountain. What exacerbated the situation was the load we were carrying. I could hardly pull myself, so someone had to carry my younger son who could not walk anymore. Finally we reached the bottom of the valley in a miserable state.

Since it was a dry season, the women told me, " Probably we will not be able to pick a good amount of grass." However, we walked until we found some ponds of stagnant water surrounded by grass. Suddenly the women jumped in the water, with their legs up to the knees in the mud, and started picking grass.

It was easy to photo document the whole trip because women were alone. There was not enough time to inform the husbands about our trip, so they were not able to join us. This allowed the women to be free during the trip and not to worry about my taking photographs. I loaded my two cameras, one with black & white and one with coloured slides. While I was taking black & white photos, my husband was shooting coloured slides, this in order to capture all the aspects in both black & white and colour at the same time.

Having taken enough photos, I felt satisfied but

exhausted, so I suggested to the group to sit and share the food I had brought with me. Since my husband was with us , the women had to cover their mouths while eating; therefore, my husband had to turn his face to the other side in order not to disturb them and let them eat comfortably.

To climb up was another difficulty. Half way up, I could not move any more and tears were all over my face. I had pain all over, my back, legs and head. It was unbelievable. I had not climbed a mountain for a long time. Seriously I thought that we would not be able to make it. I gave all what I was carrying to somebody else, and I had to stop every few steps in order to rest until we reached the top of the mountain.

While climbing I had another thing to worry about, our car. I thought about what would happen if on returning back, we found no car. It would be a disaster! How could we go back to town? How could we face the person who lent us the car? It was not insured because car insurance is not obligatory in Yemen.

I was relieved when we reached the top of the mountain

safely. After relaxing and talking to the shepherds around us I was eager to walk again and cross the fields until we reached the place where we left the car. I was so happy to see it again. We went back to MATNAH to drop off friends, each to her home; then we returned to the city Sana'a where our home was.

At the end of that hectic day, I sat to write my daily notes. I found out that despite all the difficulties, it was such pleasure to have achieved so many things, namely, having traveled so far, crossed many fields, climbed such high and rough mountains, made good photo documents, collected enough grass for basketmaking. In short, it was a great learning opportunity and a successful trip.

The wild grass that we obtained will be used as wrapping material in basketmaking. The pliability of this wild grass is much higher than that of the foundation material; yet, it is also tough enough to stand the rubbing of the sewing and the tension created when the stitches are tightened on the foundation.

This fresh grass needs to be dried before being used.

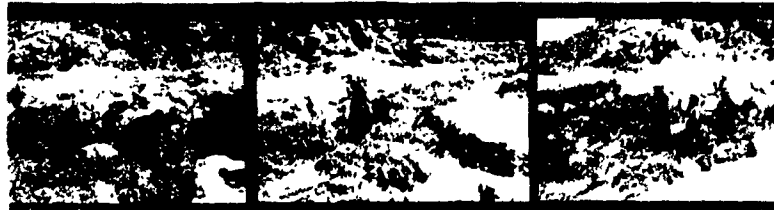
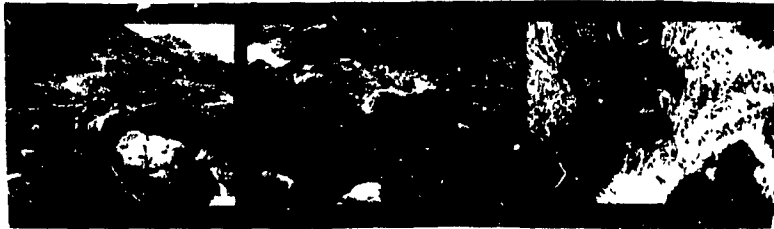
Grass bundles are dried by exposing them to the air in order to avoid mildew. Yemenite basket-makers place them in single- layer-bundles in a dark airy space so that they retain their natural colour, which would be affected if they were dried under direct sunlight.

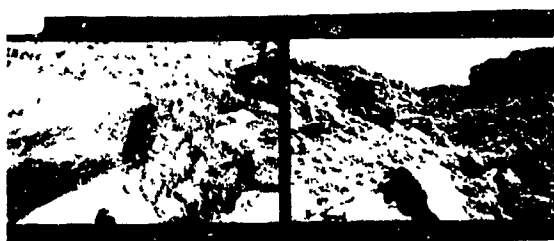
Obtaining the Wrapping Materials

Wild Grass - Picking

Trip to SIRARAH









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OBTAINING THE FOUNDATION MATERIALS

Barley Stalks Gathering

Barley stalks is the foundation material used in the village Matnah. It is a moderately flexible material, available to the people in this area. It forms a long continuous strand that is stiff enough to hold the shape of the basket, but it is also flexible enough to bend around a curve without splitting or breaking.

In general people always try to obtain wild grass for their basketmaking. The reason is that baskets made of two different wild grass i.e. one for foundation and the other for wrapping- have a softer touch, thinner strands, milder and last longer. This makes them more expensive. When wild grass is available in a nearby area, villagers often use it as foundation. But grass is not always available everywhere, and because the foundation material is not seen, people use other grass-like plants of their yields such as barley and wheat.

For the purpose of photo documentation of the foundation material, I went twice to the village MATNAH. On the

first occasion, I found Mrs. Hadad sick with fever and alone at home . When I explained the purpose of my visit, she insisted on coming with me in my car. She had to go to the field to divert the water stream. She happily got up and we went together to the field. First we went to where she changed the direction of the water; then she showed me that all grass-like plants are not ready for picking.

There was a long time gap between my first visit, documenting the foundation material, and the second. The first was in August 1988 while the second in November 1989. During this period I had learned about the whole process of basketmaking from Nidhal and Sohad . Also I had been on a trip to the valley for wild grass-picking. So when I went on my second visit I knew that in MATNAH people used barley stalks as foundation material.

Since wild grass was not available near the village MATNAH, and as we have noticed from our trip how difficult was grass picking, people use whole barley stalks, which is harvested about three times a year. I asked Mrs. Hadad if she could show me the plant and how they collect it for basketmaking purpose. So we arranged for a weekend afternoon

to go and photo-document the way of picking barley.

The fields were on mountain terraces , because people depend on rain for field irrigation. Some terraces were dry and yellow, others were green and some were in between. Mrs. Hadad took me to the most dry terrace and said, " Barley at this stage is what we need for the foundation of baskets," she started picking.

Mrs. Hadad would hold a bunch of barley plants and pull it out of the earth completely with its roots. Then she would hit it against the ground to get rid of the attached earth. She then bundled small groups of grasses together by a green grass that she picked up while moving around. After collecting enough quantity, she took it home and stacked it for basketmaking purposes.

Baskets produced in MATNAH are considered to be the simplest and inexpensive types. This type is found in abundance everywhere around Yemen.

During a visit to the village BARROWIYA, Najat, the basketmaker, explained to me that they are very lucky in this village due to the availability of both types of wild

grass which are used as foundation and wrapping. This makes her baskets of fine quality, and hence expensive. Moreover, she is considered to be a specialist in this field because of her continuous production over long time.

In another village called THEE-ESAAL where we had been invited by our close friend who comes from there, I noticed that the quality of their baskets is very fine in comparison with the general type available everywhere else. I went with our friend's mother to see the wild grass which she uses in her basketmaking. For my astonishment, it was about two minutes walk from her house. She pointed out to two different kinds of bushes saying this one we use as foundation, and the other is used as wrapping.

Here, I remembered how hard it was to obtain the grass for wrapping in MATNAH. To the women in MATNAH and in many other villages, it was a full day on-foot from early dawn till sunset carrying with them some bread as their food. In THEE-ESAAL, BARROWIYA on the other hand both types of wild grass are so close by that they can be picked up any time.

Obtaining the Foundation Materials

Barley Stalks Gathering



Chapter 5

PROCESS OF BASKETMAKING

(The below mentioned details should be read in conjunction with the enclosed Videotape, black & white prints and coloured slides.)

COILING

There are different definitions of coiling. One resource describes it as a "sewing technique"; another resource describes it as a "weaving technique". In her book on The Techniques of Basketry, Virginia I. Harvey states, "Coiling is the technique of stitching over a foundation and attaching rows of work together as the stitching progresses to form the basketry structure".

The foundation material, core or coil will indicate the MATNAH. The wrapping material, the thread that binds the core, will indicate the weft. Wild grass is used as a wrapping material in MATNAH. So Coiling is to wrap a spiral foundation-like coil, with another pliable material that is threaded through a needle and stitched over the coils.

Even though this traditional basketmaking procedure (coiling) is not the fastest method of building up a form, it has been employed for centuries by countless numbers of cultures. Coiling is one of the basic methods for beginning and completing a basket using native grass in the YEMENITE culture.

Through my observations of the three commissioned pieces, a coiled basket is usually begun from a center bottom then developed into a round base to create a basket shape. The basket is started by using stitching material (wild grass) to make the core instead of the foundation material (barley stalks). The reason is that a barley stalk is not flexible enough to bend around itself to form the coil. Barley stalks are normally inserted after the second coil and then they gradually replace the wild grass. And when reaching the sixth coil, the foundation material becomes purely barley stalks (see videotape).

The details of beginning and finishing a coil is as follows; after soaking the wild grass in warm water for about 15 minutes (see coloured slides), a bundle of about 12 grass leaves is held together from the root side. Then the

end is trimmed to make it even. One other grass leaf (weft) is then wound around the core at a distance of about half a centimeter from the end, the second strand overlapping the first one to hold it firm. Winding is always very tight. After about 12 winds, the core is bent. The grass leaf (weft) is threaded through a needle and pushed through the centre of the loop. The core is bent to form a coil.

The weft is brought from behind and over the core and stitched into the previous row. As the process is repeated the coiling progresses to increase the diameter of the coil. The coil is held in the left hand, and the weft is wound with the right hand. The coil must always be adjusted to keep the circular shape. As for rethreading of grass leaves, normally when about 8 centimeters is left, another leaf is threaded while the old one gets inserted into the foundation material. When coloured grass is introduced, the same way of rethreading mentioned above is followed. (please see black & white prints and videotape)

To finish the basket, the last row of stitching is ended as follows: the foundation is tapered and the stitching is continued to the end of the row. The row diminishes

in size and appears to blend into the previous row. This is to avoid a sudden ending.

During the third sample, a more elaborate edge is created. A pattern is incorporated into the last row of the basket, using a wrapped loop, which is made of plain wild grass as foundation, and coloured wild grass as wrapping. This is then stitched at equal spaces to the basket's edge using fibers of nylon strand (see videotape).

Chapter 6

C O N C L U S I O N

Yemenites employ three traditional methods for making baskets, namely, plaiting, weaving and coiling. I discovered that the application of these methods depends on the materials found in each region of Yemen. Unlike coiling and weaving, the plaiting method is restricted to the Tihamah region due to the availability of date-palm trees which grow only in such hot areas.

Yemenite basket-makers have always produced utility baskets to serve various purposes. For instance, woven baskets are usually made large and bulky for farmers to carry their yields (fruits and vegetables) to the market. The materials required for these baskets must be fresh and round such as branches, reeds or vines.

Plaited baskets, normally made of palm-tree leaves, are also used by farmers but to collect and carry specific products such as dates and coffee beans. Moreover, at the market, shop-owners and villagers utilize plaited baskets to display different items for sale, such as herbs, spices,

eggs, coffee husks and salt. The method of plaiting is also used to make hats and mats that are widely used in the hot region.

As for coiled baskets, I noticed their vital importance to the majority of people who utilize them in homes as trays to serve certain deserts and food, as well as containers to keep different nutritious materials such as breads, eggs, herbs and candies.

My field work involves only the type of basketry that employs the coiling method. I found out that this craft is entirely carried out by women, who carried out all the production process: collection of materials (wild grass and barley stalks), drying, dyeing and weaving (the coiling process.)

There is no formal education of basket-making in Yemen, neither by public nor private schools. In my opinion, the main reason is economical, because the establishment of training centres for basket-making does not represent a priority in the development plan of such a country facing many difficulties. The idea of having basket-making train-

ing centres could not be realized unless there was financial assistance from an overseas source such as happened in 1988 when a project was initiated with the financial and technical assistance of UNESCO to train men to make some other native handicrafts. Similarly, another project has just begun to train woman in the art of embroidery.

The above mentioned projects are run by westerners who do not know the local language, and I am not sure how much they know about the culture of Yemen. Hall expresses his concern in his book The Silent Language (1959) about the waste of good will and great effort of some countries in their overseas programs due to the little knowledge of cross-cultural communication. He also recommends that personnel sent on such assignments should be thoroughly trained in the culture of the country otherwise "we simply sell ourselves short overseas."

However, the flexible nature of the exchanging visits among Yemenite women on an individual basis or as groups has helped in the process of passing information and ways of learning crafts from one generation to another. I have experienced this process on two levels: firstly as an

observer attending women's gatherings, secondly as a student with no previous training; I was able to learn basket-making in conducted classes orally.

This was not an easy process , however the time I had spent among the Yemenite's women has helped me to learn more about myself. Despite the difficulties I experienced during this research, I found that ultimately the results are rewarding. "One of the most effective ways to learn about oneself is by taking seriously the cultures of others." (Hall 1959)

In the village MATNAH, women accompanied by their children and teenage daughters often get together in different homes. They would spend their time talking about various subjects. It often happens that one of the women would be making a basket. So, others will incidentally be watching that process. Meanwhile, a teenage girl or a woman would ask the basket-maker to let them participate in the process. Those who ask must have observed such work for sometime and have had many indirect lessons.

When a woman is interested in learning basket-making, as I was, then the "teacher" would start the core to form the coil up to the second row, then pass it to the "student", who continues the work under the supervision of the "teacher".

The setting mentioned above shows us that the process of learning basket-making is not an isolated activity; rather it is part of the Yemenite women's life. Unlike the situation in developed countries, Yemenite women do not need to follow an educational course at a scheduled time in a special institution.

A happy and very relaxed atmosphere prevails while a learner is being trained to make a basket. Some women would be telling stories of their marriage; others would be discussing childbirth, new engagements in the village, animals or crops. Women even tell "dirty" jokes. Learning basket-making is part of regular life.

Despite the flexibility of learning such an art, I noticed that within the Hadad family, only Nidhal and one of her sisters knew how to make baskets. Her other three

sisters were not familiar with it. I noticed that Nidhal's mother had no interest in basket-making while her grand mother was a specialist in it.

We have seen from the field work that Nidhal was a close friend of Sohad, whom I found much more efficient in basket-making than Nidhal. Sohad is an expert in finding and picking wild grass. Although Nidhal was younger than Sohad, they seem to have spent enough time together through which Sohad had passed the knowledge of this art on to Nidhal. So it is in such an amicable atmosphere that basketry is learned and practiced.

The importation of synthetic fibers into the Yemenite market had a noticeable influence on baskets made with coiling method. It has sometimes replaced the wrapping material (wild grass), which is so difficult to obtain (as shown earlier in this study.) Because I have seen very old samples which belonged to the grand mother of my female teacher in the village of MATNAH, I was able to observe that the basic style and shape of coiled baskets has not changed for at least three generations.

Men in general look down on basket-making and never appreciate what women go through to finish such a piece of art. When I used to go and learn basket-making, men who are relatives of my female teachers have always criticized me by saying, "why are you wasting your time to learn such a thing? This simple work is not worth paying attention to".

In my opinion, such an attitude by men is because basketry is exclusively done by women, and in a strictly male dominated society anything done by women is considered valueless. What exacerbates the situation is the recent flow of inexpensive machine-made containers (plastic, wooden or metal) from abroad. This has given men the opportunity to be even more derisive about women's basket-making. Now it is possible to get any kind of container faster and cheaper than a basket made by women.

Accordingly, women have been to some extent discouraged from making baskets. In addition, women were motivated to be relieved from men's criticism. Also, buying ready-made containers saves them time to do other house work and to enjoy their free time.

This study has confirmed what previous researchers have mentioned in regard to the status of village women in Yemen. A woman's day starts just after dawn prayer working in the fields side by side with men from her family. This continues till noon; when everybody come home to have lunch prepared by women. From my observations, men would be chewing Qat in the afternoon while women either return to the fields or do household chores.

My experience suggests that rural and village women are not restricted to their house and that they normally go unveiled. I have noticed how Nidhal, when returning to her village, after having lived in the city, expressed relief to be back and enjoy the freedom of moving between home and fields again. She seems to have suffered from isolation and loneliness while imprisoned at her house in the city. Yet, she had the opportunity to learn about reading and writing as well as training to be "teacher" of basketry within her neighborhoods. This situation is supported by Hall in his book Beyond Culture, where he points out that separations (most are painful), which we experience during our lives, develop new levels of integration, identity, and mental growth.

Basketry of Yemenite women is an art form. It had persisted for such a long time, therefore, it is considered a "good" art. And "good art is always high-context." (Hall 1976). High-context actions are by definition rooted in the past, slow to change, and highly stable. The traditional Yemenite method of passing the knowledge of basket-making, as described earlier, represents high-context communication. This is described by Hall as communication in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while a low-context communication takes place when the mass of information is in the form of explicit code. And from my observations, I have not seen any coded form of information.¹

This research documented events and ideas. During the nineteen months period, I tried my best to have a good mutual understanding between Yemenite women and myself because it was very important that each person realize what she is and is not. This reflects the possibility of discussing context in relation to meaning, because what one pays attention to or does not attend is largely a matter of context. Hall observed, that meaning and context are bound up with each other, while a linguistic code can be analyzed on some levels independent of context. Hence one could say

that this research was conducted from a high-context point of view.

Yet, the visual part of this thesis that includes slides, prints and videotape may be looked at as low-context because one of the consequences is that the viewer never knows what is going on "off camera". But my detailed description is intended to assist the reader in engaging in a high-context relation to my experience and the idea of using the three modes of documentation mentioned above is also to assist the viewer to be as involved as possible in showing the real setting and the surrounding context of the basket-making.

The purpose of this project is more than a documentation of a process or the studying of a culture. I hope to contribute some long-term benefit to these women as a result of this study rather than simply witnessing their difficulties. I had the pleasure to live in Yemen for 19 months. During that time , I traveled around the country , spent time with both urban and rural women, and became moderately familiar with their social and cultural environment. Action research, as stated by Bogden and Biklen (1982), is the

systematic collection of information that is designed to bring about social change. I intend to apply it as a way of bringing forward further issues that will lead to solutions. This should not only help women develop confidence in themselves, but also assist them in their struggle for better conditions.

In the future I hope to be able to secure some financial support from Canadian sources to initiate projects assisting women and their art of basketry. If such opportunity does not materialize, I shall pursue similar projects among native women in Kahnawake (Quebec) with whom I have established good relationship during the past several years.

End note:

Low-Context (LC)

High-Context (HC)

1- "A (LC) communication is" when "the mass of information is vested in the explicit code. Twins who have grown up together can and do communicate more economically (HC) than two lawyers in a courtroom during a trial (LC), a mathematician programming a computer, two politicians drafting legislation, two administrators writing a regulation, or a child trying to explain to his mother why he got into a fight." (Hall, 1976, p.79)

"In general, (HC) communication, in contrast to (LC), is economical, fast, efficient, and satisfying,.....(HC) communications are frequently used as art forms. They act as a unifying, cohesive force, are long-lived, and are slow to change. (LC) communications do not unify; however, they can be changed easily and rapidly. This is why evolution by extension is so incredibly fast; extensions in their initial stages of development are (LC)."(Hall, 1976, p.88)

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